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THE STUDY OF LANGUAGES--A POINT OF VIEW.

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY IN SCHOOLS SHOULD BE PREDICATED ON THE NEED OF SOCIETIES TO COEXIST WITH OTHER CONTEMPORARY NATIONAL CULTURES. IN A WORLD THAT CONSISTS OF A LARGE NUMBER OF HISTORICALLY DETERMINED, SEPARATE CULTURES, LANGUAGE ALONE CAN PRESENT THE LINGUISTICALLY CONDITIONED THOUGHT PATTERNS, THE "REALITY," OF A SPECIFIC CULTURE. LANGUAGE MAY BE INTERPRETED AS A SYSTEM OF MORE OR LESS ACCURATE AND ADEQUATE LABELS THAT EXPRESS OBJECTIVE AND ABSOLUTE "REALITY," OR IT MAY BE THE EXPRESSION AND EMBODIMENT OF HISTORICALLY CONDITIONED "REALITIES" RELATIVE TO EACH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE. HOWEVER, TO ACHIEVE REALISTICALLY DESIRED BETTER INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING, THE LEARNER MUST TREAT EACH HUMAN LANGUAGE AS A CODIFICATION OF A COLLECTIVELY SUBJECTIVE "REALITY," AND MUST GAIN IN THE STUDY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE AN INTIMATE AND SYMPATHETIC KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONTRASTING "REALITIES" OF OTHER CULTURES THAT SELECT, ORGANIZE, AND EXPRESS EXPERIENCE DIFFERENTLY THAN HE DOES. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "LIBERAL EDUCATION," VOLUME 51, NUMBER 4, DECEMBER 1965. (AB)

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The Study of Languages: A Point of View

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Language teaching, says the author, must be founded on recognition that every language is the vehicle and reflection of a distinctive view of reality

It is clear that ever since hominoids began to speak there have always been separate "peoples" speaking more or less mutually unintelligible languages. If we use the word *language* in the sense it commonly has in standard English, we may add that throughout human history each such natural language has typically been found intimately associated with what the sociologist calls a *society* and the anthropologist a *culture*. It is also generally true that very similar languages (of the kind often called *dialects* of one another or of a supposed parent or standard language) are regularly found associated with societies or cultures that resemble each other in approximately the same degree as their respective languages (or dialects).

It is possible to analyze each such society or culture in terms of the habitual beliefs and practices general among its members, some of which they may share with some or all of the members of one or more other societies, but the sum total of which constitutes a unique *Gestalt* which defines a particular society in contradistinction to all others. One of the distinguishing characteristics of a society is its language: the whole pattern of systematic, habitual linguistic behavior common to the adult participants in that culture. These definitions exclude the possibility of a single society in which several different languages are spoken or, conversely, of several recognizably different societies that share a single language.

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It is impossible today to postulate any meaningful and accurate description of the genesis of human speech and of separate languages. It is important in this context to emphasize that greatly increased probability is the most that we can reasonably hope for; certainty in this matter seems to be an unrealistic goal. Nevertheless, there are a number of clearly established facts and various strong probabilities concerning the linguistic situation of mankind in the past that are of interest to the student of language and to the historian.

First, the earliest recognizably human societies were undoubtedly small, few in number, comparatively isolated from one another, as well as nomadic and therefore more dependent on the whims of nature than more highly developed societies have been in more recent times. Clearly, too, it is justifiable to assume that the earliest societies of *homo sapiens* had languages in no substantial respect different from those we know today. The process whereby human societies become typically sedentary, less dependent on the whims of nature and more populous has been very slow, has not progressed at a uniform rate over the whole planet and, it is reasonable to assert, will continue to evolve. The rate of change seems in fact to be such that another millennium will perhaps see changes equal in number, complexity and implications to all of the steps taken by men from the very beginning of human history along their several roads toward *civilization*—a misleadingly singular noun in standard English usage.

It seems reasonable to posit that the struggle for survival—in the fullest sense of the English word survival—has been the paramount factor in the development of human civilization and that the second most important fact has been play.

Let us now make certain assertions and then proceed to examine them in some detail. First, any particular language is a function of the specific culture of which it is *inter alia* a systematic symbolic expression or codification, and it is simultaneously one of the sources of growth of that culture. The semantic "packages" for which the component parts of a given language are, essentially, conveniently manipulable verbal symbols are linked among themselves by bonds. Those bonds are readily apparent in the psychologist's word-association techniques and, in the layman's experience, in the fact that a fully acculturated participant in a given language community does, in fact, easily follow shifts in conversation that result from crossing one or more of these bridges among words. Such bonds are just as much a part of specific language systems as are the words, forms, syntactical patterns, etc. that are more usually treated in grammars, dictionaries and courses

of formal instruction. Much "new thought," many "insights" are, it seems, nothing more than consequences of exploring such a vast system of interlocking symbols and referents, the bonds among which are in most cases as much culturally conditioned and as arbitrary as the symbols themselves and the semantic packages for which they stand.

It is essential to remember in this discussion that the total shape or form of a comparatively simple culture is in many important respects a function of the circumstances obtaining in the physical environment in which that particular group of human beings and its ancestors have struggled to survive and in which they have played. The language of such a society, particularly in its lexicon, is largely determined by those same conditions. Later and more complex cultures such as ours have all evolved from such comparatively primitive antecedents, not *ex nihilo*.

There are well documented studies in which an investigator records his surprise at the wealth of terms for phenomena that are evidently of greater importance to speakers of the language studied than to speakers of Indo-European languages. Probably the most often cited of these instances is the elaborate nomenclature in Eskimo for what in English we call simply "snow." It seems infinitely more subtle to the speaker of Eskimo, who thinks rather in terms of separate phenomena of great practical and emotional importance for him, while we conceive of them as merely different aspects of a single, unitary phenomenon—snow.

One direct consequence of this difference in the two languages, which results from a major difference in the "vital circumstances" of their speakers, is that, while it is presumably difficult if not impossible to make an adequate translation of a treatise on nuclear physics from English into Eskimo, it is equally difficult to English satisfactorily an Eskimo text in which snow plays an important role. Indeed, since it is very likely that snow will loom large in any primarily Eskimo context (in any context, in other words, in which traditional Eskimo life is important) it is clear that it will usually be quite difficult to render Eskimo texts adequately into English. The native speaker of Eskimo who also knows English well will very probably find any English version of an Eskimo text gross, oversimplified, sketchy, lacking in subtlety and nuances—in a word, naïve.

Similar situations are not far to seek. In other words, it is wrong to assume, as most people do, that the language of an "advanced" culture, such as English or French, is necessarily and obviously able to express accurately and easily everything that can be stated in the language of

a less advanced or even primitive people—that, in other words, a language like English is merely more complete than a language like Eskimo. English, according to this view, "contains" the content of Eskimo, a less perfect or at any rate less complete set of labels for "reality." In fact, however, it seems that the scheme of things or "reality" of which Eskimo is a linguistic expression is not incomplete but *different*.

In order to prepare translations into Eskimo of texts, for example, on nuclear physics it would not be sufficient merely to create a corresponding technical vocabulary in that language. Such a process would have to be preceded or paralleled by a process of initiation into many concepts which are non-existent in the Eskimo scheme of things and which would not be meaningful to the speaker of Eskimo, precisely because his linguistically conditioned thought patterns do not lead him to reason in the particular ways of which those notions are specific instances.

In practice, any given language is assumed by the great majority of its speakers to be a system of labels attached to reality. It is a system in that its constituent elements behave in essentially consistent ways. Let us accept both the notion that any given language is a set of labels for a "reality" and the notion that those labels are manipulated in certain statable and essentially systematic ways, but let us add that the reality that is so labeled is not entirely of the tangible, physical world; much of it is made up of abstractions, emotional states, fictitious entities and so forth.

If we try to define "reality" for our present purposes, we find that there are essentially two possibilities. First, underlying the unbroken flow of phenomena which makes up the universe there may be a single, objective, absolute reality, and human languages may therefore be systems of labels which are some more and some less accurate and adequate for the expression of that reality. Alternatively, there may be no single, ultimate, absolute reality but as many different "realities" as there have evolved languages. As different peoples have groped forward through the ages, they have evolved various ways of selecting and grouping some of the numberless phenomena that they have perceived around them. That selection and grouping has depended on a wide variety of factors that have played more or less important roles at different times and in varying historical circumstances within the evolution of each such separate language community. In this second case, in other words, each language is the expression and embodiment of a historically conditioned and relative *Weltanschauung*.

Now while many people *believe* that they know the absolute, objective reality of the universe—the "natural order"—no one can demonstrate conclusively that such a reality is in fact known to exist and consequently no one can authoritatively describe that reality. No one, therefore, can judge to what extent any particular language reflects reality. So, at least for practical purposes, we must treat each human language as a codification of *a* reality and not merely as an approximation to an ideally valid codification of *the* reality. It is clear of course that each such reality is intrinsically as valid as any other, although some will necessarily seem more interesting than others to different observers.

When men talk about fostering "better international understanding" (and other similar notions) what must be meant in practical terms, therefore, is first a preliminary willingness to accept the existence and validity of other ways of selecting and organizing experience —other "realities"—and secondly the deliberate pursuit of intimate, sympathetic knowledge of such other realities. *A foreign language must be learned not as a more or less satisfactory alternative set of labels for an objective, known, unique reality but rather as the expression of a collectively subjective reality which can only be discovered by means of its expression.*

It seems clear that the serious university student ought to become as well acquainted as possible with at least one such view different from the one reflected in his own language. To achieve sympathetic insight into it he ought to become intimately aware of the points of similarity and contrast between that foreign reality and his own habitual view of the world. For instance, the English-speaking student of Spanish must accept the notion that *ser* and *estar, por* and *para,* for example, are not felt by Spanish-speakers to be two halves, so to speak, of single, unitary concepts, which are clearly, neatly and efficiently labeled in English by means of the correspondingly unitary "words" *to be* and *for.* They are units of a different reality.

Let us consider another example. The speaker of English normally takes it for granted that there is in nature itself an obvious, objectively discoverable division into *mountains* and *hills, trees* and *bushes* of what is in each of these two cases a range of similar phenomena—some larger others smaller—which can be arranged roughly by size in an ascending order (*hills* to *mountains, bushes* to *trees*). But these "packages" are merely conventions of the English language; they were established in the past and transmitted to today's speakers of the language together with the prejudices they imply concerning "reality." There are infi-

nitely numerous similar situations in which different languages do not agree in their "packaging"; such disagreement is in fact the rule rather than the exception. (We are avoiding altogether the infinitely more complex question of the extent to which all members of a given language community inherit and share identical notions of the meaning of specific words, etc.)

The student of a foreign language must "repackage" phenomena as he learns that language and, most importantly, he must acknowledge the arbitrary character of the packages into which he has learned to group selected phenomena in the process of acquiring his own mother tongue. It is precisely this realization that constitutes the intellectual justification of the study of a foreign language for the non-specialist. That acknowledgment must be sincere; it can only arise out of intimate experience of the foreign language, and only time and constant deliberate exposure to the possibility of such experience can produce the necessary degree of intimacy.

It seems obvious, therefore, that what should be presented to the student of a given foreign language is not so much what "we" and "they" have in common as what separates "us" from "them." It is not, in other words, the universality of anything Spanish, for instance, that should occupy him primarily: it is rather the peculiarly Spanish aspects of the Spanish tradition that must be the principal objects of his attention.

The relatively unlettered speaker of English believes that the words the grammarian has traditionally called *nouns* stand in some simple, direct way for real, tangible "things." The more sophisticated speaker believes that nouns stands for *classes* of things and he defines "things" to include much that is intangible, not readily measurable, abstract. But speakers of both types assume that such things are somehow objectively "there." Furthermore, the speaker of English, to continue with our own familiar tradition as an example, typically assumes that *nouns, verbs,* etc. are words belonging to self-evident categories that are necessarily reflected in the structure of all natural languages. His experience of foreign languages in school is unlikely to have disabused him of this conviction, both because most of his teachers are as naïve as he is, and study and teach as though different languages were nothing other than alternative sets of labels for a single, objective reality, and because he has very probably studied languages of the same general type as English.

Since the categories of noun, verb, etc. are obvious in the languages commonly studied in this country (Latin, Greek, French, German,

Italian, Spanish and, in more recent times, Russian), the average student whose curriculum has included a certain amount of voluntary or prescribed study of one or more of these foreign languages is likely to have been confirmed in his prejudices by that experience. But that very grammatical category or "part of speech" that has been called a *noun* or *substantive* in the traditional grammar of these tongues is no more an objectively ascertainable and describable part of the natural order than are the words of the English language and the notions that they label.

In sum, the "view of the world," the notion of reality, professed implicitly by most and explicitly by a few adults in any society is at least in part a function of the language they speak, while the categories and relationships implicit in that language are functions of the experience of the linguistic and cultural ancestors of the speakers. A natural language may be defined, then, as a set of systematically manipulated verbal symbols for an essentially arbitrary view of the world (*Weltanschauung*) or reality, which is largely a heritage from previous generations and which is fundamentally a function of the circumstances in which those linguistic ancestors have lived.

In addition, relatively advanced societies have usually evolved a literary language, usually only written but sometimes spoken by the educated in certain circumstances. Such a literary language is generally characterized by a consciously recognized standard of correctness and by an accumulation from the past of examples of accurate or otherwise noteworthy use of the resources of that language: a *literature*. Literature is thought expressed by means of a literary language. A literary language is a *standard language*. Thought, as the word is used here, is intended to be broadly inclusive of the fruits of the rational and emotional processes of the human brain.

Typically, the literature of a given people is two things. *Contemporary literature* is the public forum of discussion in which the struggle to understand, analyze, organize and record experience and rational thought takes place in serious, careful ways. The *literary tradition* or classical canon is a sort of museum of the best thought of the cultural ancestors of those for whom it is tradition. This, in turn, means at least three things. First there is the accumulation and transmission of thought which was once new and is now only revered. Secondly there is a concomitant accumulation of linguistic wealth: the intellectual and aesthetic struggles of the past have yielded new language—new combinations of old words, new values for existing words, new words—and the written record preserves and transmits the aggregate of those

achievements. Lastly there is inevitably a certain residue of valuable but unexploited insight, thought and linguistic treasure in the canon of literature that comes to us out of the past.

In short, French literature, for instance, is a linguistic record of the collective experience of the French people as it has accumulated through the last millennium, the record of the evolution of a view of the world, much of which passed through the prism of public debate and was eventually refined into formal scholarship and science. Certainly not the least of the products of that experience is the French language itself.

The notion of literature also involves *style,* the aesthetic uses of language. What is aesthetic or artistic, however, is conditioned for the speakers of each language by the structure and history of that language: certain possibilities are inherent in the language itself, some of them are singled out and assigned aesthetic values or functions and these, in turn, may vary in time.

It is clear that we now live in a world in which a large number of historically determined, separate national cultures coexist, and it is likely that the situation will not change materially for some generations to come, although of course the relative importance of the several national cultures will surely change as time passes.

It seems clear that since language is basic to all but the simplest human activities, since each separate language presents a view of reality that has important consequences for the thought processes of its speakers, and since the only realistic choice we have is between coexistence among our contemporary national cultures and the states that serve them or non-existence, the principles are self-evident upon which the teaching of foreign languages in the schools should be predicated. Primary stress should be placed at all times on the *Gestalt* of characteristics that identifies a given culture and on the way or ways in which that *Gestalt* is catalogued in the speech of the participants in that culture. We render no service to anyone if we ignore important differences among people that can be isolated and described in favor of intrinsically vague and ill-defined notions of universal human values. Differences among national cultures and their value systems are both more numerous and more profound than certain traditions in American education commonly lead both students and teachers to believe.

The student should be trained in one foreign language and it should be presented as the vehicle, reflection and occasional catalytic agent of its culture. This is a time-consuming process. It should be begun

early and continued well into college. Provided that the language and culture studied are major, the choice of language does not matter, since the purpose of such training is to provoke in the student an experiential realization of the relativity of reality. He can be told in few words that reality is relative but until he has experienced that relativity and come to understand its source for himself such philosophical statements remain empty and meaningless.

Such training should of course emphasize the aesthetic or artistic uses of the language in question—but always according to the standards of native speakers within their own tradition, since the aesthetic and artistic are notions that are clearly relative to individual languages. It is clear of course that this entire, essentially contrastive process presupposes in the student an intimate and conscious knowledge and experience of his own culture.

It is essential that the student be led to understand the evolution of a language in intimate union with its cultural context. The literature of that tradition must be studied on its own terms, as an exercise in *Kulturgeschichte,* a study of the intellectual ferment of the speakers of that language. Clearly, however, much of what was once lively, sparkingly new debate, discovery or construct is now trite; what is important is that the student understand thought in its *original* framework and as an ingredient in what follows it. It is equally clear that the teacher of literature, in this sense of the word literature, must be superbly well educated in all aspects of the cultural tradition of the literature he teaches. Such is lamentably not now generally the case.

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